Palmer gets lesson in dissent

School day continues as usual after protest, counterprotest

By SHARI CHANEY
THE GAZETTE

By the time Sam Stidham sat down just before 8 a.m. to take his psychology test Friday, pickets from Kansas had left the sidewalks outside Palmer High School.

A larger crowd that had gathered across the street to counter the pickets from Westboro Baptist Church was dispersing, too.

The school day would go on as usual, just as school and district officials had hoped. But they had worried plenty about the convergence of pickets, curious teens and a counterprotest that could attract people who might be disruptive.

Ten pickets, including four children and one videographer, from Westboro Baptist Church in Kansas spent less than an hour outside the school in protest of students who asked the school to recognize a Gay Straight Alliance club. The students have sued the district for denying the request.

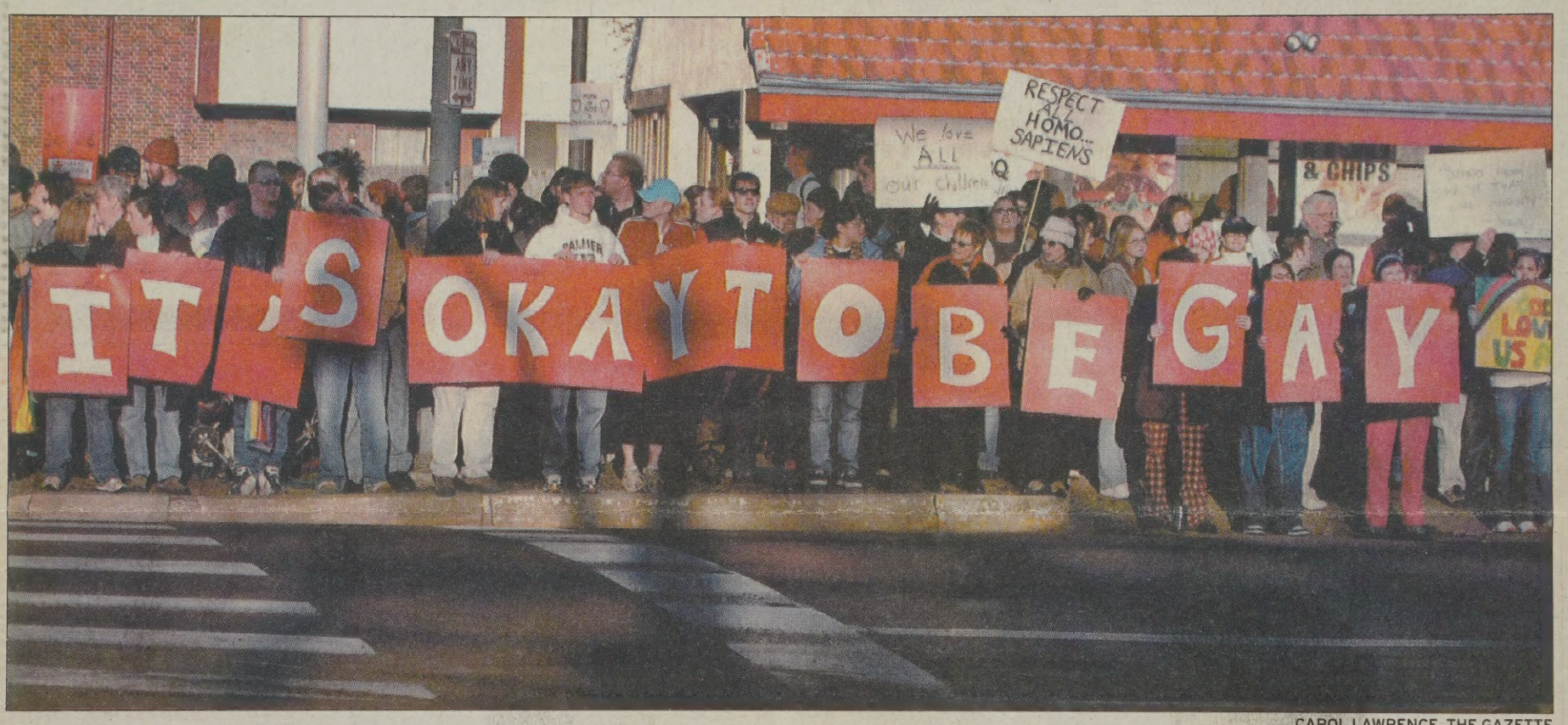
Hundreds of counterprotesters stood on adjacent street corners and in Acacia Park, most with messages of tolerance.

That gathering was organized by Students of Social Justice, Springs Action Alliance and state civil rights groups.

Police estimated the crowd at 500 people.

"I think it went well," said Colorado Springs police Sgt. Mike Lux. "There

SEE PICKETS • PAGE 8



CAROL LAWRENCE, THE GAZETTE

Counterprotesters line up Friday morning on the northwest corner of Platte and Nevada avenues with signs in response to an anti-gay demonstration by the Westboro Baptist Church. The church protesters were outnumbered by counterprotesters, who largely spread messages of tolerance.

Minister, followers preach hate for the love of God

By CARY LEIDER VOGRIN
THE GAZETTE

Dozens of times each month, the Rev. Fred Phelps and his family fan out from their home base in Topeka, Kan.

It's been this way since 1991, when Phelps' church, Westboro Baptist, held its first public picket in a Topeka park. Today, the church — made up mostly of Phelps' extended family — takes credit for 22,000 such campaigns against gays.

Fred Phelps: Pastor of Westboro Church in Topeka, Kan.

Church members protested outside the 1998 funeral of Matthew Shepard, a gay college student beaten to death in Wyoming, and held signs at the 2003 service of beloved TV personality Fred Rogers — "Mr. Rogers" to millions of children.

Phelps and his followers — among the most caustic anti-gay protesters in the nation — refer to these events as "Love Crusades," although their neon signs are anything but warm and fuzzy.

They do, in fact, preach hate — specifically that God hates people.

"The only way to love someone is to tell them the truth," said Fred Phelps' 29-year-old grandson Ben Phelps, who led Friday's picket in front of Palmer High School in downtown Colorado Springs with a sign reading "Fags are Worthy of Death."

Those familiar with Westboro Baptist Church, however, say the real force behind the group isn't God, but the First Amendment.

"The Phelpses are basically a family of attorneys, and they know what the law is," said Bill Beachy, president of Concerned Citizens for Topeka, which formed more than a decade ago to counter some of the Phelpses' speech. "People say, 'Gee, how do you tolerate them?' An awful lot of what groups like the Phelpses do is protected by the First Amendment, as ugly as it is."

Several relatives are attorneys, and the family has a law firm, Phelps Chartered, in Topeka.

Westboro Baptist got its start in November 1955, when Fred Phelps was 26. Today, at 75, he still leads the church, a congregation of just more than 50 consisting primarily of several of his 13 children and their families.

After so many years and so many protests, the Phelps name is well-known in the capital

SEE PHELPS • PAGE 8

JON AUSTRIA, THE GAZETTE

Buses dropped off students at the back entrance to Palmer High School on Friday to avoid protests by Westboro Baptist Church over a proposal for a Gay Straight Alliance club at the school.

PROTEST REACTION

"They aren't as impressive as I expected," said Desiree Hoffman, a sociology major at the University of Colorado at Colorado Springs who arrived at 6 a.m. to protest the Topeka demonstrators.

• • •

"The way I see the people over there is they're sort of like a gay pride parade ... just on the other end of the spectrum," said Colorado Springs psychotherapist Jack Freeman, who came to watch the protest and counterprotest.

• • •

Don Porter, 46, and Gloria Romans, 57, came to counter the Westboro protesters after hearing about them on the radio.

"The children need to know that hate is wrong and hate will hurt everybody," Romans said.

Nothing panel says

MORE ONLINE

Falcon Exploratory Incorporation Committee:
www.falconcolorado.org

orated, a 2 percent sales tax ee will finance the town. So if Patterson opts out, he'd said e'd pay the tax when he shops n Falcon but would get none of s benefits.

"Frankly, I feel more like art of Black Forest," he said, but I see Falcon having a bet- er tax base."

Members of the Falcon and Black Forest incorporation committees will meet March 19 o open survey responses and ally the results. Both groups agree they'll bend to the will of he majority.

The benefits of incorpora- ion could include a police orce, post office, library or community center. It also ould give residents a more di- ect voice in planning the area, FEIC members say.

A small group of people ormed the FEIC last fall to tudy the idea of forming an of- icial community. It's held a se- ies of public meetings. The FEIC is tentatively moving to- ward a November incorpora- ion vote.

The FEIC's next general meeting is at 7 p.m. Tuesday at Woodmen Hills Elementary School library at 8308 Del Rio Road in Falcon.

Black Forest's incorporation study is more preliminary than Falcon's. Its committee members haven't decided whether the idea merits a community vote.

MILITARY UPDATE

Congressman intends to refocus VA, cut costs

BY TOM PHILPOTT

COMMENT

Rep. Steve Buyer, R-Ind., new chairman of the House Veterans Affairs Committee, says the medical and rehabilitation needs of a new generation of war veterans leave him more certain than ever that Congress erred in 1996 when it opened VA health care to any veteran willing to pay modest fees.

"While some veterans' organizations like to create a theme, that 'a veteran is a veteran (and) there is no difference,' I disagree," Buyer said.

A decade ago, after the Persian Gulf War that saw relatively few U.S. casualties, the Department of Veterans Affairs went back to worrying about an aging patient population and underused VA clinics and hospitals, Buyer said.

Those concerns, along with wishful thinking about the VA billing employer-provided insurance plans for the cost of care, led Congress to open VA facilities to veterans who were neither poor nor disabled.

Time has shown that to be a mistake, Buyer said. The VA has $3 billion in uncollected debt for health care services that insurance companies have not paid.

"We find ourselves now in protracted wars in Iraq and Afghanistan and the war on terror all over the world," Buyer said. "So the sense from 1996 that we could open up the VA to protect the bricks and mortar because of a declining population of veterans" is replaced by "the reality that we have more veterans now that have to come into the system."

Buyer's comments came after his committee voted to impose an enrollment fee of $230 to $500 a year on 2.4 million veterans in priority categories 7 and 8, which are for those who are not poor and have no service-connected disability.

In January, Republican leaders removed Rep. Christopher Smith, R-N.J., as committee chairman for being too close to veterans groups, too supportive of expanding benefits and too dismissive of Bush administration plans to slow VA spending and impose fees on low-priority veterans.

Buyer, 46, is an attorney and Citadel graduate who was deployed in the first Gulf War as an Army Reserve lawyer. As chairman with oversight responsibility for the second-largest department in the U.S. government, Buyer said he has three short-term priorities:

- Refocus VA health care on its core constituency of service-disabled, indigent and special-needs veterans.
- Develop a seamless transition process for veterans moving from active duty to VA care. More than 10,000 have been wounded in Iraq and Afghanistan, and as many as 100,000 could develop post-traumatic stress disorder, he said. "The VA needs to prepare to receive them."
- Improve VA rehabilitation and vocational training to ensure that even the most severely injured veterans return to rewarding lives.

"For a lot of years, it was, 'Here's your check. Good luck in your life. And if you find it in a bottle, we'll try to get you in a program,'" Buyer said. "I want the system to be far more personal."

Buyer also said he expects a bipartisan Veterans Disability Benefits Commission, which will hold its first meeting soon, to review whether Congress went too far in allowing the concurrent receipt of military retirement and VA disability payments. Buyer said that as chairman of the House subcommittee on military personnel a few years ago, he "found $25 million" to lift the ban on receiving concurrent payments for only 100 percent, combat-disabled retirees.

"Little did I realize that my care and concern would be so enveloped" by politics, he said, and the ban quickly lifted to benefit a few hundred thousand retirees, many having no combat-related disability.

Buyer also expects the commission to consider whether to change the way disability ratings are set or to tighten the definition of service-connected injuries or ailments.

"There is something bothersome in the system where you can have a soldier blow out his knee from a roadside bomb and end up with a disability that's the same as a guy who blew out his knee sliding into home plate at church league softball on Sunday," Buyer said. "Is that the type of disability system that is just and fair?"

Buyer said he wouldn't want to assure veterans with disability ratings that they will be excluded from commission recommendations.

"I think everything should be on the table," he said.

An idea Buyer wants considered is offering lump-sum payments to veterans with disabilities rated 20 percent or less, as settlement of all future compensation claims.

"Part of the problem is there's gamesmanship in the system whereby (veterans) consistently, over their lifetimes, keep reapplying for their ratings, trying to get (them) bumped up higher and higher," Buyer said.

Veterans' organizations that claim that every veteran earned the right to VA health care, and use what Buyer sees as inflammatory rhetoric to knock proposals to raise fees on nonpoor, nondisabled veterans, are abandoning values such as duty and sacrifice under which veterans served, he said.

Comments or suggestions are welcome. Write to Military Update, P.O. Box 231111, Centreville, Va. 20120-1111 or milupdate@aol.com or visit Philpott's Web site at www.militaryupdate.com.

Owens tells security panel to finish work

By KYLE HENLEY
THE GAZETTE

DENVER • Gov. Bill Owens this week ordered the Colorado Department of Public Safety to restart a stalled committee that is supposed to assess the state's post-9/11 security blind spots.

The 53-member Critical Infrastructure Committee has not met in more than six months and has not produced its mandated report detailing potential security risks and terrorist targets.

2005 General Assembly

Owens gave the order this week to Joe Morales, who heads the Department of Public Safety, the organization responsible for Colorado's homeland security programs.

The federal government recently announced $91 million in new homeland security grants to be distributed to the states for protecting infrastructure.

Some lawmakers believe Colorado's share of that money — $1.4 million — shouldn't be spent until the committee completes its work.

"The bottom line is that we need that report, and we need it yesterday," said Sen. Dan Grossman, D-Denver, who heads the Senate Select Committee on Homeland Security. "I think the department should put a stop on all grant spending until we know what our needs are."

Administration officials also hope the report will be completed before the state receives the grant money.

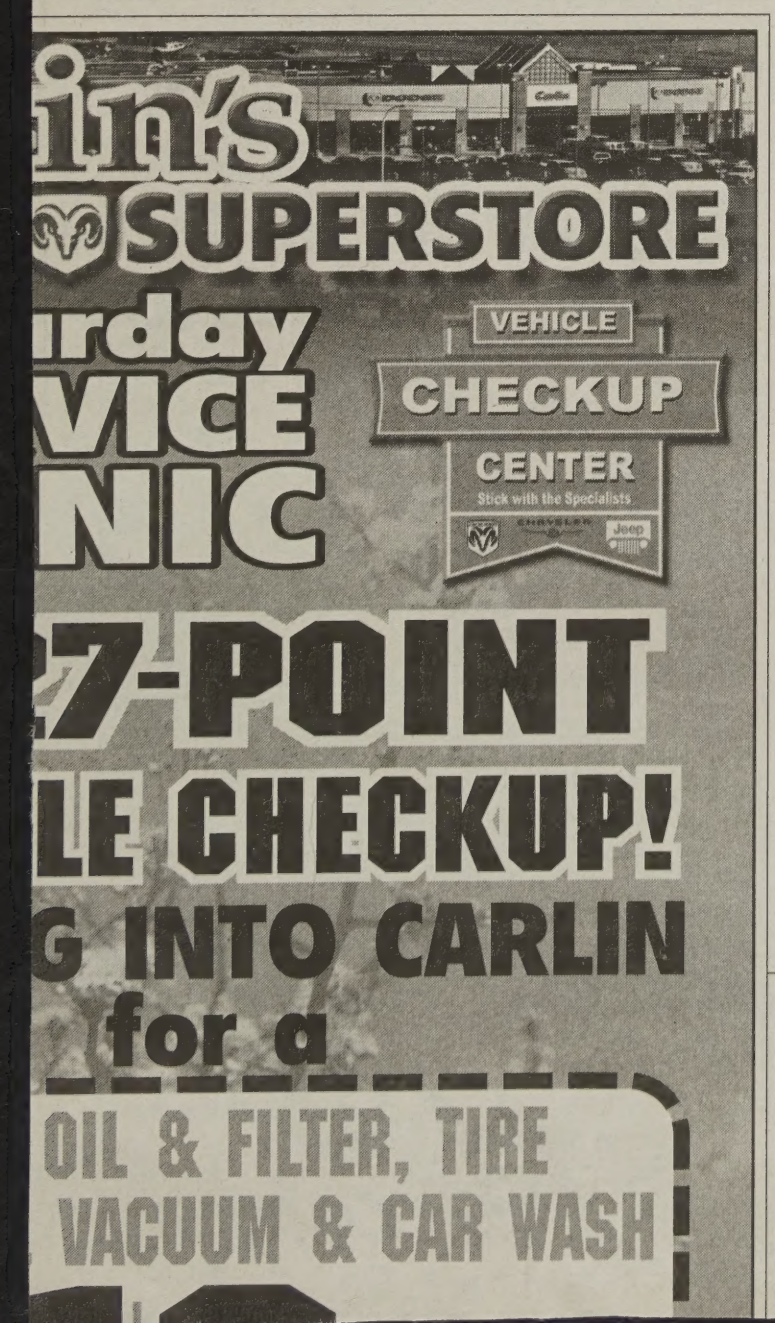
It's not exactly clear why the committee, made up of public and private-sector representatives, stopped meeting. A member of the committee testified March 3 before the Senate Select Committee on Homeland Security that the infrastructure committee had run out of money and couldn't come up with $100,000 to $250,000 to finish the reports.

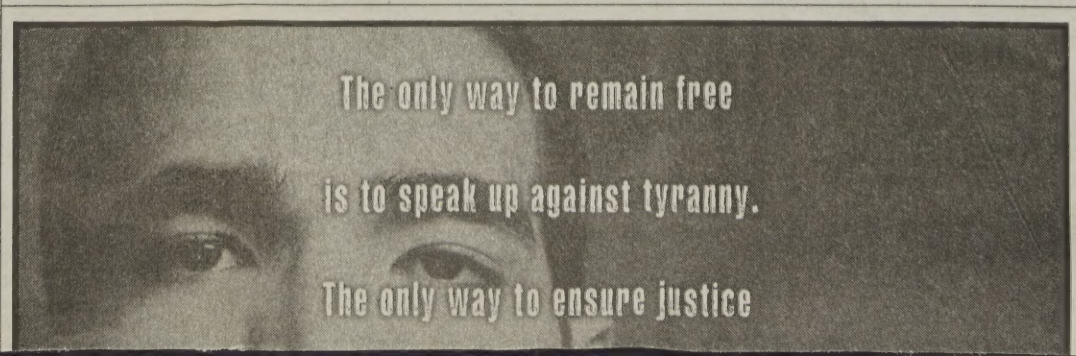
Public safety officials say the committee was held up because some private firms wouldn't divulge security details for fear the information would get into competitors' hands.

"There just a lot going on behind the scenes," Morales said Friday. "A lot of it is that we are learning prioritizing and planning, and we have to be more strategic."

Morales said he is still formulating a timeline to get the committee up and running.

"The message was very clear," he said.





JON AUSTRIA, THE GAZETTE

Westboro Baptist Church member Ben Phelps, center, is escorted Friday by Colorado Springs police officers. The Kansas-based church – made up mostly of the Rev. Fred Phelps' extended family – takes credit for 22,000 campaigns against gays.

PHELPS: Kansas capital has fought for a fair image

FROM PAGE 1

city of Kansas.

"I'm one who believes he's given us a very terrible reputation around the country that Topeka is a hometown of hatred," said Roy Menninger, who once led Concerned Citizens for Topeka and is chairman emeritus of the Menninger Clinic, a world-renowned mental-health treatment and research facility. "People who don't know anything about Topeka may know about Fred Phelps.

"I think no visitor who sees them is other than offended," he said, adding the city has lost convention business because of the church.

Menninger said a former Topeka mayor went so far as to send letters to cities on the church's protest list, saying the Phelpses weren't representative of Topeka.

Westboro Baptist members protest somewhere in Topeka almost daily, in sunshine or sleet. The city's newspaper, churches and funerals of gays are usual targets, but so are businesses or organizations with even remote ties to the gay and lesbian community.

Fred Phelps even showed up at Menninger's mother's funeral.

At one time, bumper stickers that said "Not today, Fred" were given away in the community, Menninger said.

Until recently, the Phelpses were becoming "non-news" in Topeka, said Menninger, but the city again made national headlines this year when Phelps' granddaughter, Jael Phelps, ran for City Council in a primary election against an openly gay councilwoman. Phelps came in last in the primary, with 5 percent of the vote.

"People say, 'Gee, how do you tolerate them?' An awful lot of what groups like the Phelpses do is protected by the First Amendment, as ugly as it is."

BILL BEACHY – Concerned Citizens for Topeka

But the council race wasn't the only election for which the family campaigned.

At the same primary vote March 1, voters decided on a gay-rights related issue put on the ballot after a petition drive by the Phelps family, said Beachy, of the citizen's group.

The ballot issue sought to overturn an ordinance that said the city would not discriminate in hiring based on sexual orientation. Voters rejected repealing the measure, 53 percent to 47 percent.

Said Beachy: "That was a really good boost for people who are for fairness in Topeka, Kansas, and to show people outside Topeka that we don't have to do what the Phelpses want us to do."

CONTACT THE WRITER: 636-0236 or cary@gazette.com

PICKETS: Some students venture out for peek at protest

FROM PAGE 1

was only a small number of protesters, and a large number of counterprotesters. Everyone did what they were supposed to do in terms of safety."

Crosswalks were kept open, and people moved along when police asked them to, Lux said.

No arrests were made; more than a dozen officers were on hand with riot gear, including helmets and gas masks.

Teachers and school security officers enticed students into the building as quickly as possible with doughnuts and encouraged the use of side entrances that would keep students away from the picketers.

When the school bell rang at 7:44 a.m., school started. Tests went on as planned. Palmer Principal Karin Reynolds gave a motivational speech to students about the Colorado Student Assessment Program exams that start next week. Teachers taught.

"I'm going to go in my class and teach," said Cindee Schwartz, a special education teacher at Palmer. "It's just a regular day."

Still, a few students ventured out before class to see what was going on.

Freshmen Cody Wruck and Dominic Walker grabbed their doughnuts and headed out to check out the protest.

"I just want to see," Walker said.

"They've got signs that say, 'Gods hates fags,' and I don't believe that," Cody said.

That was Sam's beef with the picketers — they were doing it in the name of Jesus.

"That's not the Jesus I believe in," he said.

"I think it's pretty stupid," said senior Nick Orban, who was headed across the road at Boulder and Weber streets with sophomore Chloe Surage.

Chloe said they might walk by the protest just to see what was going on.

Just after the group from Kansas arrived at the corner of Nevada and Platte avenues, a group of students including two girls holding hands headed toward the protest.

"Be careful over there," one security guard called after them. "Put your buttons on."

He was talking about a pale blue button that read "Choose Kindness, Stop Violence" that students were encouraged to wear as part of kindness week at the school.

The themed week was planned long before officials knew about the picketers, Reynolds said Thursday.

The International Diversity Club and student council sold lemonade during the week, and students each received the buttons and pencils that said, "Big enough to walk away to stop the violence."

"It's just great timing," Reynolds said of kindness week.

Gazette reporters Anslee Willett, Cary Leider Vogrin, Ed Sealover, Tom Roeder and Brian Newsome contributed to this report.

SHOWING SUPPORT

At first, Sara Thomas was upset and scared when she heard Westboro Baptist Church planned to picket her alma mater.

Thomas is one of the plaintiffs in a lawsuit against Palmer High School and Colorado Springs School District 11. The lawsuit came after Thomas and others wanted to start a Gay Straight Alliance, but were denied.

Thomas now attends Grinnell College in Iowa.

Thomas said Thursday that she was confident Friday's picketing and protesting at Palmer would be nonviolent and students would be able to use the event discuss issues such as gay rights and freedom of speech.

"I hope students don't take Fred Phelps' message to heart," Thomas said.

She also noted the importance of counterprotests to ensure students know they are supported.

•••

District 11 officials said the school board plans to issue a resolution of support at the next board meeting for Palmer High School students, staff and Principal Karin Reynolds. The resolution will be brought forward by board member Eric Christen.

Gay couple's death 'shatters' staff

Poor Richard's shuts down after crash

By LISA MARTÍNEZ
THE GAZETTE

Councilman Richard Skorman stood feet from the Westboro Baptist Church protesters Friday with tears welling in his eyes.

Being there was especially personal for Skorman, known in the community as an advocate for gay rights.

He'd just learned that two of his longtime employees at Poor Richard's restaurant were killed Thursday in a multivehicle crash in Nebraska.

Jeanne Kerechanin, 54, and her partner Pamela Hartman, 46, of Manitou Springs were killed in Lincoln when five semitrailers and three vehicles collided. One truck driver also died in the crash.

"The staff is shattered," said Skorman, who spent Friday with employees and friends, who left flowers in front of the closed restaurant.

The wreck happened when blowing dust on the highway caused one truck driver to slow down. That began a chain reaction of vehicles crashing into one another, and the couple's vehicle was engulfed in flames, police reports say.

Both women were managers at the restaurant, and they were familiar faces to everyday patrons.

Skorman closed the doors to the restaurant, toy store and bookstore.

COURTESY OF RICHARD SKORMAN

Jeanne Kerechanin, 54, left, and Pamela Hartman, 46, who worked at Poor Richard's restaurant, died in a car accident Thursday in Lincoln, Neb.

He might not reopen until Monday.

He also closed when employee Jocelyn Sandberg was killed in 2002.

Kerechanin and Hartman were on their way to the funeral of Hartman's brother.

Otherwise, the couple would have been at the counterprotest — with signs in hand, friends said.

"One of the last things Jeanne said before she left was, 'Give 'em hell, Richard,'" said Skorman, who showed appreciation for the large crowd of counterprotesters.

Kerechanin and Hartman were well-known in the community for their support of gay rights. They attended PrideFest events and were open about raising Hartman's biological son together.

Carrie Fields, a friend of the couple, said Kerechanin and Hartman never pushed their beliefs on anyone who didn't agree.

"If you were gay, if you weren't gay ... They were accepting of everyone," she said.

Ryan Acker, director of the Pikes Peak Gay and Lesbian Community Center, said Poor Richard's employees like Kerechanin and Hartman always welcomed gays.

"It's a shame we suffered this loss," he said.

Memorial plans have not been announced.

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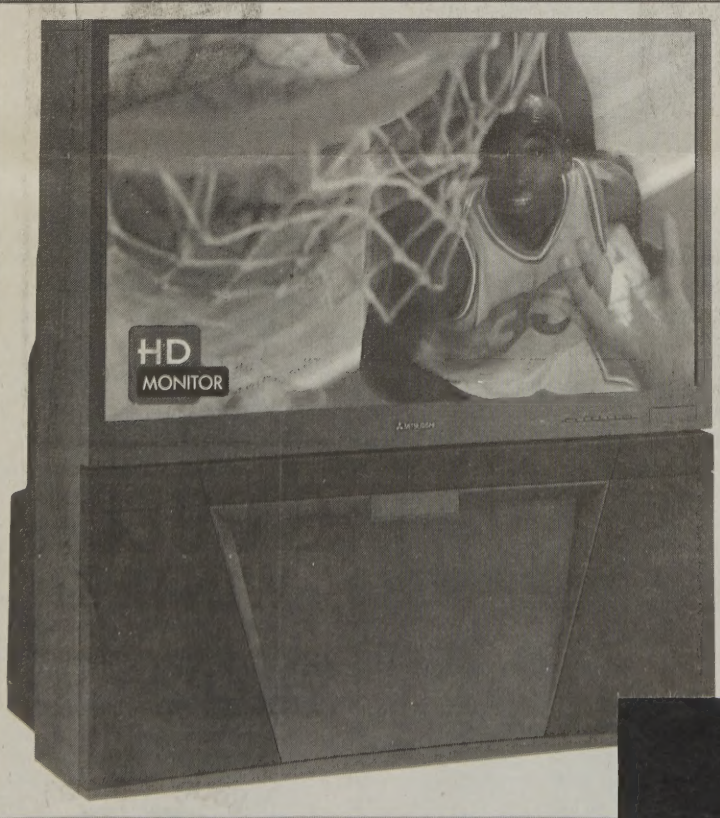

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